



an online journal of film & tv studies

department of culture, film and media, university of nottingham

scope@nottingham.ac.uk

ISSN: 1465-9166

Issue 16 February 2010: Articles

Terrorist Attack!: The Spectacle of Evil in the Blended Horror of Cloverfield

James Aston, Liverpool Hope University, UK

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and more specifically the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York represented, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, "the absolute event" (2002: 4). That is, an event without a referent or precedent whether physical or symbolic, a "pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place" (2002: 4). Baudrillard goes on to mention the difficulty in representing 9/11, as there was no referent with which to anchor the images or relate the event to. The absence of a palpable antecedent that popular culture could refer to or make use of, had the effect, suggests Baudrillard, of throwing the conditions of representation and analysis of the attacks into crisis. However, there have been numerous examples that have acted as a model or referent for the attacks of 9/11, both in reality and in media representations. These have taken the form of natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, mass starvation and famine and comparable terrorist attacks such as the truck bombing of a US federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995. Media, and especially cinematic, representations have also provided many precedents of large scale disaster and as such have engaged audiences with visible representations of which to make sense of real life disasters such as 9/11, even though a majority of these strategies have turned toward fantasy and fictional narratives in order to make sense of events that took place.

Indeed, narratives of widespread disaster or apocalyptic scenarios have occupied a central ground in the Hollywood horror/science fiction genre. In the first cycle of apocalyptic sci-fi during the 1950s films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and *It Came From Outer Space* (1953) respectively dealt with the twin fears of nuclear Armageddon and the threat of

Communism. In the 1970s the fear of cults and religious groups prompted the 1978 remake of the classic "borrowing bodies" film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and in the late 1990s fears about the impending millennium and eschatological prophecy was spectacularized in *Armageddon* (1998) and *End of Days* (1999). Most recently, postmillennial apocalyptic sci-fi has similarly tapped into contemporaneous anxieties and fears by featuring end of world scenarios brought on by extreme weather conditions (*The Day After Tomorrow* [2004]), infectious pandemic disease (*The Happening* [2008]), and terrorism, war and immigration (*Right At Your Door* [2006] and *28 Weeks Later* [2007]). However, with this latter cycle, the events of 9/11 have prompted similarities to be drawn between the real events of this day and Hollywood portraits of disaster and apocalyptic scenarios. Films such as *War of the Worlds* (2005), *I Am Legend* (2007) and *Cloverfield* (2008) have engendered explicit connections to be made within the public sphere toward the events of 9/11 and subsequent fantastical narratives of the apocalypse, thus undermining Baudrillard's thesis that 9/11 was an unprecedented event unimaginable in public and cultural consciousness. Indeed, Žižek has coined the phrase a "cobweb of semblances" (Žižek, 2002: 12) that suggests a link between these two forms of representation which has prompted ethical concerns along the triumvirate of representation/memory/past to be articulated. This has been especially prevalent with regards to the spectacularization of destruction and evil and the ways audiences engage with these narratives in terms of how they apply them to traumatic events.

For Susan Sontag, in her essay "The Imagination of Disaster," sci-fi lends itself to the representation of large scale traumatic events, whether real or anticipated, because their fantastical narratives can make the extraordinary immediate. That is, images such as "physical deformity and mutation, missile and rocket combat, toppling skyscrapers" can be translated through a "sensuous elaboration" (Sontag, 1967: 212) into the realm of the imagination. Sontag contends that this "imagination of disaster" can allow most people to cope with fear brought on by apocalyptic threats by neutralising it through sci-fi's use of fantastical narratives. Furthermore, the use of fantasy is coupled with a narrative model that follows a distinct ideological pattern and tends to aestheticise destruction. Thus for Sontag, the science-fiction film serves to allay anxieties and fears circulating in society by

providing a morally simplified and visually entertaining diversion. Sontag's criticism of the spectacle of evil in 1950s sci-fi has re-emerged in post 9/11 apocalyptic sci-fi whereby Neil Bather has suggested that "popular cinema has become dependent upon images that highlight and isolate the spectacle from any hidden depth of meaning" that have spectacularized the representation of evil so that a generic or formless version has developed (Bather, 2004: 37). Such a conception of evil has problematized media representations and memory processes conflating the temporality of the events of 9/11 and apocalyptic sci-fi so that spectators engage in a memorialisation of 9/11 even though they did not directly experience the event. That is, their memory of 9/11 is prosthetically applied via media representations, both of the actual event and fictional narratives, that transports the viewer to an experiential site of memory that although deeply held they did not directly experience. In turn, the availability of and exposure to cinematic representations of apocalyptic narrative whether pre- or post- 9/11 has engendered the destruction of the World Trade Center to be described as "just like a movie." As such, this reaction to 9/11 relates to Alison Landsberg's recent work on memory and the notion of prosthetic memory in American mass culture. That is, traumatic events such as 9/11 can be experienced and remembered via media representations and experiential sites such as the cinema rather than solely by people who were directly part of the event.

Set in the geographical and ideological aftermath of 9/11, *Cloverfield* addresses Sontag's imagination of disaster, Bather's spectacle of evil and Landsberg's notion of prosthetic memory by providing an apocalyptic sci-fi with explicit allusions to 9/11 that challenges notions of the real and traditional conceptions of memory acquisition. Therefore, analysis of *Cloverfield* as an archetypal post 9/11 apocalyptic sci-fi film will facilitate an understanding of the relationship between memory and experience in the mass media, demonstrating that prosthetic memories and experience are not merely false or inauthentic but can provide both a progressive political outcome and an ethical viewer response to traumatic historical events. [1] The analysis will hew closely to academic work on monster narratives within horror and sci-fi films in order to explain how, why and for what purpose the monster is seen as a "perennially useful social tool" (Ingebretsen 2001: 9) in delineating post-9/11 American society. In doing so, it will complement the

approach of Landsberg in terms of looking at cinema as a form of prosthetic memory of 9/11.

***Cloverfield*, Critical Reception and 9/11 Connections**

Cloverfield, directed by Matt Reeves and produced by co-creator of *Lost* J.J. Abrams, was released in the US in January 2008. The film follows five young New Yorkers as a gigantic monster of unknown origin attacks the city.[2] The narrative is a fairly standard hybrid of the monster/horror movie but is distinguished in that the action is captured by one of the lead characters on a handheld digital camera. The result is a shaky, vertigo-inducing, cinema-vérité style monster movie, perhaps the first of its kind, which belies its multi-million dollar budget, state-of-the-art special effects and meticulous choreography. The film's unusual perspective is furthered by focusing the story on a group of ordinary young New Yorkers rather than a team of scientists or military personnel and is compounded by having the footage presented to us as if found in the aftermath of the monster attack. The narrative focus of this "found" video file is on a group of five characters led by Rob (Michael Stahl-David) to whom we are introduced during his leaving party. After the arrival of the monster and the ensuing destruction, the film follows Rob and his friends as he attempts to find and rescue his girlfriend Beth (Odette Yustman). In typical horror fashion, members of the group die at various points in the journey and although Rob is eventually reunited with Beth they are both killed by the "Hammerdown" protocol instigated by the military in a final attempt to kill the monster.

Cloverfield's recourse to spectacle and recognizable narrative tropes of the monster/destruction and the love story/rescue appears initially to underline Bather's notion of a "formless version" (Bather, 2004: 38) of evil to emerge that exists primarily within the surface of the image rather than based on the more substantial and explanatory markers such as political belief, race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Also, the emotional and personal response to disaster represented by the quest of the five main characters in *Cloverfield* coupled with the monster's violent and seemingly random and inexplicable attack on Manhattan outline good and evil in precise Manichean terms. Therefore, in order to expand on what appears to be a highly conventional representational strategy, it is necessary to account for the audience reception of *Cloverfield* so

that a fuller analysis of the success or limitations of the narrative strategies of the film can be formed.

The first group of people to assess *Cloverfield* as it was released into the public arena were the film critics of the newspapers and magazines that procure large circulations and are accessible to large sections of people nationwide. While the caveat must be added that this group constitutes a narrow band of elites privileged in their access to Hollywood and the platform with which to authorize their evaluations, it must be noted that they nonetheless formed the first attempt to relay the cognitive element of *Cloverfield*. That is, they were the first to provide an intellectual assessment of the aesthetic and thematic mechanisms of the film. In this respect, critical reception added to the connection between *Cloverfield's* teaser posters and "real" scenes from Manhattan following the attack on the World Trade Center. Thereby, in continually evoking allusions to 9/11 formed through the narrative of the film, critical reception emphasized the resemblance between the film and the traumatic site of 9/11, moving it away from simply being a primitive form of gratification. For example, Roger Ebert commented that many scenes in the film were "unmistakable evocations of 9/11... [and] so explicit are the 9/11 references in *Cloverfield* that the monster is seen knocking over skyscrapers, and one high-rise is seen leaning against another" (Ebert, 2008). Similarly, the *Village Voice* remarked that "Street-level 9/11 footage would fit seamlessly into *Cloverfield's* hand-held, ersatz-amateur POV; the initial onslaught of mayhem, panic, plummeting concrete, and toxic avalanches could have been storyboarded directly from the CNN archive" (Lee, 2008).

Other critics looked upon *Cloverfield's* 9/11 symbolism less favorably, with the *New York Times* dismissing the film and its "tacky allusions to Sept 11" (Dargis, 2008). *Salon* was even more disparaging in their review that carried the headline, "Do we really need the horror of 9/11 to be repackaged and presented to us as an amusement-park ride?" The article continues by saying, "*Cloverfield* harnesses the horror of 9/11 – specifically as it was felt in New York – and repackages it as an amusement-park ride. We see familiar buildings exploding and crumpling before our eyes, and plumes of smoke rolling up the narrow corridors formed by lower-Manhattan streets, images that were once the province of news footage and have now been reduced to special effects" (Zacharek, 2008).

Popular opinion was also explicit about the relationship between the film and the events of 9/11. Many film related blogs and internet sites carried forum discussions and threads that dealt specifically with discussion about *Cloverfield's* use of 9/11 imagery. [3] Although it would be an overstatement to say most of the response to the film, both leading up to and after its release, was specifically concerned with 9/11 allusions, a definable discourse did emerge that situated the film as connected to the shared public history of 9/11, and thus forms part of how 9/11 is communicated, interpreted and remembered within the public sphere.

Prosthetic Memory and the Potential of an "Ethic of Response"

The critical and popular recognition of 9/11 alluded to in *Cloverfield* can be linked to Alison Landsberg's recent work on prosthetic memory in American mass culture. Landsberg's work on and concept of prosthetic memory can provide a pertinent and challenging addition to the contested memory of traumatic public history represented via the mass-mediated and mass-technological site of cinema. Landsberg contends that prosthetic memories are able to unite people along contours of race, ethnicity, class and gender via memories of events they did not directly experience. In this respect, prosthetic memories have a social and political potential in that they can form "unexpected alliances across chasms of difference" (Landsberg, 2004: 3) that produce empathy toward the historical and contemporary experiences of other groups in society due to the non-essentialist and non-exclusive nature of these "implanted" memories. Therefore, mapping Landsberg's work onto *Cloverfield* contributes to understanding of cinema as an "experiential" site of historical representation with regards viewer reception of traumatic public history. The spectator, through this particular kind of contact, "sutures himself or herself into a larger history" that does not "simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live" (Landsberg, 2004: 2). In these terms, Landsberg forwards the concept that the mass technological and experiential site of cinema provides "an important mode of knowledge acquisition" (Landsberg, 2004: 1) over contested and controversial historical events that enables an ethical response, in that empathy and understanding can be formed of the historical and contemporary experiences of other groups in society.

Landsberg cites the circulation of Holocaust remembrance in American popular culture as an example of both the political and unifying potential of prosthetic memories. The public sphere of Holocaust remembrance incorporates divergent cultural representations such as *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986), *Schindler's List* (1993) and Washington, DC's United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which Landsberg contends have the potential to act as "transferential spaces" that may instill in people experience of events they did not directly experience or live through (Landsberg 2004: 23). In this respect, not only can these accessible cultural forms bring people together from different backgrounds, whether they be social, political or geographical, they can also form prosthetic memories of the event that can "afford anamnestic solidarity with the dead [and] make available strategies of political engagement for the present and future" (Landsberg, 2004: 24). By widening out experience so that people are brought together who previously may not have had anything in common, prosthetic memories can change the emphasis on the real, the authentic and sympathy toward the categories of knowledge, responsibility and empathy.

Therefore, the notion of ethical frameworks implanted via the experiential site of cinema, and in this case *Cloverfield*, is addressed for the very reasons that prosthetic memory provides a democratic and inclusive relationship with the past that brings such events into a public sphere of accessibility. That is, if a historical event such as 9/11 becomes part of the public sphere then, as Ludmilla Jordanova has stated, the event is "essentially open-ended, and accounts of it are public property, available for numerous uses" (Jordanova, 2000: 155). The relevance of viewing it as such and its subsequent representation in cinema is the pathway it creates for analysis of the diffused and differentiated relationship the public has with the past. Thus, as the past enters the realm of public property, various and contested interpretations form as the social demographics vie to "own" the past predicated on not only social, political, cultural and economic factors but also remembrance of the past situated within the personal and the subjective. Therefore, Landsberg's account of public regimes of memory formed by mass technological and experiential sites can create new ways and challenges to dominant knowledge and power systems. In addition, prosthetic memories can also feed back into ethical frameworks in that they are able to confront traumatic events so that

they become imaginable, thinkable and speakable to us and can begin to work through, as Dominick LaCapra has suggested, the implications of trauma that although may never "cathartically redeem the self or fully heal the wounds of the past" can still "provide an ethic of response, even a political incentive, to effectively counteract...the posttraumatic effects that differentially affect members of a society or culture"(LaCapra, in Picart and Frank, 2006: x).

However, the inability of post-9/11 Hollywood films in general and *Cloverfield* in particular to directly represent the trauma of 9/11 does have the negative capability of removing the viewer from the immediacy of the event and any confrontation that is a prerequisite for the coming to terms and working through of any particular traumatic event. *World Trade Center* (2006) and *United 93* (2006) stand as the most prominent Hollywood films to deal directly with the events of 9/11. The narratives of these two films focus more on universal and timeless aspects of human agency that heavily feature heroism and sacrifice than on a political explanation for the attacks or how Americans and the rest of the world will deal with such a widely circulated traumatic event. To circumvent the limits of traumatic representation, Hollywood has predominantly implemented fictional narratives to comment on the events that day. Most notable was the Steven Spielberg-directed *War of the Worlds*. The film updates H.G. Wells' classic science fiction novel into a contemporary, post-9/11 America in which Tom Cruise has to protect his family from an alien invasion. According to Kirsten Moana Thompson, the imagery of the film deploys:

several set pieces that specifically recall[ed] the destruction of the World Trade Center, including the clouds of clothing that float to the ground after the death rays of the aliens vaporize fleeing humans. In response to an electromagnetic pulse sent out by the alien craft, airplanes fall out of the sky. As panic rises in New Jersey and across the globe, missing posters can be seen everywhere as [Cruise's character] tries to keep his family safe, and people ask each other, 'did you lose anyone?' (Thompson, 2007: 147)

At one marked point before the threat had been fully realised and understood, Cruise's daughter in the film says haltingly, "it is terrorists?"

Similar references and narrative developments are evident in *Cloverfield*. For example, terrorism is clearly mentioned as a potential cause before the

monster appears and the love story subtext and the subsequent rescue and reunion of the two main characters are comparable to Cruise's journey in *War of the Worlds* to reunite his family. Similar journeys occur in other post-9/11 apocalyptic films such as *Children of Men* (Cuarón, 2006), *I Am Legend* and *28 Weeks Later*. Although reunion in these films have different outcomes, they nonetheless tap into media attention given to New Yorkers and the need of being with or finding loved ones in the aftermath of 9/11. Thus, both the explicit and implicit references to 9/11 in films such as *War of the Worlds*, *Cloverfield*, *28 Weeks Later* and *Children of Men*, combined with audience reception that is equally mindful of the connections, does not suggest a total cognitive removal from the social and political milieu of America in the early twenty-first century. In fact, in noticeably accessing the imagery of 9/11, *Cloverfield* can activate memories of the event for viewers with both direct and indirect experience of it. This is evidenced in the response to the film, in both critical and popular circles, which has openly discussed the film and its relationship to 9/11. This recoups the approach of indirect representation by suggesting not so much a removal from a traumatic event but "transference of memory from the body of a survivor to a person who has no 'authentic' link to this particular historical past" (Landsberg, 2004: 111). The authentic (9/11) comes into contact with the inauthentic (*Cloverfield*/Hollywood) producing the potential for "memory to be transferred across temporal and geographical chasms" (Landsberg, 2004: 111). With this in mind, it is then possible to talk about a responsible, shared, mass-cultural memory that exists amid the context of a Hollywood film.

Representation of the Monster in *Cloverfield*

However, further analysis surrounding the potential of *Cloverfield* in providing an ethical response needs to be framed in terms of what people are being asked to respond to and how it is represented within the narrative of the film. Hence, in order to examine the successes and/or limitations of *Cloverfield's* engagement with ethical frameworks of remembrance and representation of 9/11, it is necessary to look first at the film's narrative and representational strategies. *Cloverfield* asks audiences to respond to a narrative of good versus evil that is conceptualized through the threat of the monster. The form and trajectory of the monster is further structured through the Hollywood canon of the sci-fi and horror genres that have acted as a primary conveyance for

representations of the events of 9/11. It is therefore vital to understand the role evil plays and how it is represented cinematically through these genres.

Generally, the function of a monster or the monstrous, whether in horror, sci-fi, or fantasy genres or in wider social and political discourse, is to lay out and clearly define or confirm a socially acceptable "map of civility" (Ingebretsen, 2001: 1). In this regard, the monster appears from without, seemingly unprovoked and directionless yet intent on violence and destruction. Thus, the monster acts as a metaphor that plainly delineates any transgression to the normal and civil society while conterminously justifying "normal" society's reaction to and action against the threat to its civil borders. Edward Ingebretsen has termed this the paradox of the monster, in that "on one hand the monster is burdened with behaviors that are deemed to threaten society. On the other hand, the monster makes such incivilities possible, even justifies them or others in the name of the common good" (Ibid.: 2). Such a framework predominantly represents the monster in strictly Manichean terms and as such "becomes the literal other onto which society can pin all of its anxieties, fears, and guilt. The monster is the recurring and repetitive source of social trauma" (Picart and Frank, 2006: 136). Typically, therefore, the monster acts along axes of gender, race, sex, technology, science and politics. When such a formula is applied to the cinema and cinematic representations of monsters then historical events like 9/11 are transposed and conflated into cinematic horror stories. The problem of the monster metaphor for a traumatic event such as 9/11 is that representation veers toward a binary understanding of the event. In doing so it merely replicates and provokes fears and anxieties already circulating in popular discourse that contribute to intensifying social trauma.

Outlining the form of the monster in sci-fi and horror genres as simply confirming a definable landscape of good and evil veers toward Bather's conception of the spectacle of evil as formless and exterior in the Hollywood high-concept film. However, Picart and Frank, in *Frames of Evil: The Holocaust as Horror in American Film*, define two horror frames that can be applied to the monster narrative. [4] On one hand, there is the classic horror frame that renders evil as mythical, conventional and external. On the other hand is the conflicted horror frame that rather than establishing a monster that is wholly separate from us instead attempts to "weave evil into

normality, refusing to recognize an unassailable gap between the two spheres [of monster and society]" (Ibid.: 9). In these terms, *Cloverfield* embodies both the classical and conflicted horror frame as outlined by Picart and Frank. That is, the monster in *Cloverfield* represents the myth of the Leviathan or Behemoth that finds its modern prototype in the literary text of Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and the cinematic text of *King Kong* (1933), but is also continued in contemporary horror and sci-fi films such as *Jaws* (1975), *Godzilla* (1998) and *The Host* (2006). These examples switch between the classical and the conflicted horror frame in that they ambiguously explore the relationship between man and animal and the monster and society. The monster in these types of film are not simply delineated in the classic sense as the monstrous "Other" as they can also be seen in a Freudian perspective as a "projection of some sort of repressed part of the Self" (Andriano, 1999: xi). Therefore, the monster acts as the return of the repressed and its monstrousness, whether represented in its size, its form or its actions, can be recognized not solely as "Othered" but as images and tropes of our own human behaviour. That is, the monster is presented as uncanny whereby the "familiar Self [is] disguised as the alien Other" (Andriano, 1999: xi).

If the monster is the return of our own repressed Self then the climax of conflicted horror "cannot end with the apparent exorcism of the monster because monstrosity is an enemy from within, rather than without" (Picart and Frank, 2006: 13). Even if the monster is killed within the narrative of the film, as is the case with *Jaws*, it returns in a sequel, thus appearing to be immortal. It is as if we need this monster in order to define who we are or at least to sustain orthodoxy along the contours of gender, race, class and sexuality. [5] Picart and Frank further contend that the horror film should not reductively be seen as either conventional or transgressive but as a combination of the two; a hybrid form supplying the landscape on which horror's "ideological contradiction and negotiation" (Picart and Frank 2006: 13) can be played out. The notion of a blended horror frame can thus provide an ethics of response in the viewer in that the film actively refuses to supply definitive answers on notions such as evil, trauma and horror. Instead, hybrid horror narratives can provide an open forum to continue debate and investigation into the understanding and interaction with traumatic events. With this in mind, to view *Cloverfield* as offering a potentially progressive

"ethics of response," it is essential to analyze the film as blended horror in order to ascertain whether the film encourages a working through of the social trauma of 9/11 or a reductive reliving of a repetitious fantasy scenario.

Evil Within: The Blended Horror Frame of *Cloverfield*

Cloverfield begins with a title page identifying that what is about to follow is a videotape released by the US Department of Defense recovered at a site formerly known as Central Park. Immediately, survivor response is negated or at least rendered mute or unavailable by the film, favoring recorded film testimony instead of physical survivor testimony. It also privileges the direct representation facilitated via the video camera, an underlying aspect of the film that consciously mentions more than once the power of filmed footage and the notion that if it doesn't happen on film it does not happen at all. [6] The destruction caused by the threat in the film is also alluded to in this title sequence: the text "an area formerly known as Central Park" intimates that the devastation caused by the yet-unknown threat was so serious and complete that it is now impossible to describe the park as it once was.

When the threat eventually materializes after an extended party sequence in which we are introduced to the various young protagonists, there are numerous responses of "is it a terrorist attack?" as the partygoers rush to the top of the building to get a better look, or to film a better look, of the events. The audible reaction that the explosion may be a terrorist attack directly binds viewers to 9/11 before the monster is known as the cause and seen by both the characters and the audience. The connection is immediately expanded upon via the monster's ensuing destruction of Manhattan. Scenes that directly or indirectly reference 9/11 include the destruction of the Statue of Liberty, another New York landmark and American symbol; destruction of various skyscrapers; clouds of ash; dust and general debris billowing down streets and avenues. In particular, a sequence after the collapse of one building eerily evokes amateur footage taken immediately after the collapse of the South Tower [7] and many instances of people taking photos and film as well as being transfixed by television news reporting on the mayhem going on in Manhattan.

The resultant destruction that the monster instigates appears completely without motivation, and the monster's origins remain unclear. As such the

monster conforms to one of the dominant elements of the representation of the monster in Hollywood, namely, that it has to be abstract and blank, vicious and violent and seemingly intent on the destruction of humankind. In turn this sets up a second critical element, and what is at the heart of Ingebretson's paradox of the monster, the justification of violence in order to kill the monster. *Cloverfield* sets up the representation of the monster that conforms squarely to these two elements so that traditional and straightforward binaries of good/evil monster/victim can be created and maintained. In turn this representation offers a reductive and simplistic account of good and evil that has as its source the events of 9/11 despite the fantasy/monster narrative. At this point the film accedes with Bather's spectacle of evil thesis and Picart and Frank's narrative pattern of the classic horror frame. In promoting a coding of the monster as spectacular, external and blank and forwarding boundaries firmly fixed in their representation of good and evil, normal and abnormal, human and monster undoes any sense of the possibility of an ethical response to the events of 9/11. This level of representation in *Cloverfield* severely limits a progressive and empathic remembrance or evocation of the events by replicating discourses that seek to spectacularize evil and define it in binary terms. At this level of analysis the film negates an interpretive level of understanding of the events of 9/11 and hence the possibility to confront and work through the traumatic crisis that the event still embodies. Thus, *Cloverfield* appears on the surface to be a conventional Hollywood horror/sci-fi film replete with an exciting cinematic spectacle of evil. The ensuing grand, large scale destruction of Manhattan conforms to the ferocity of the Leviathan myth and its subsequent cultural manifestations, and in doing so recalls Sontag's position on 1950s sci-fi films' detached and aesthetic view of destruction, focused on the technology of disaster rather than its emotional and psychological impact.

However, the military response to the threat of the monster in *Cloverfield* challenges Sontag's contention that the technology of disaster provides a remote and uncritical viewing position. That is, the actions of the US military that run concurrent with the destruction caused by the monster in the film provide a counterpoint to the generally positive view espoused by films such as *Armageddon* and *Sunshine* (2007) in the use of weapons for the greater good. In *Cloverfield*, the actions of the military culminate in a shocking

response to the threat that makes ambiguous the film's seemingly rigid good and evil. In the film's climactic sequence, the US military initiate the "Hammerdown Protocol," which as one Army personnel mentions, is to "level" Manhattan in order to kill the monster. This last act of the film brings to an end the transmission of the events and to the remaining characters filming it. The audience hears an explosion before the camera goes blank, leaving us unaware if the monster is alive or dead. The implication of such an act is that it undermines the central tenet of the monster movie, namely that violent response is always justified no matter how severe. The enjoyable spectacle of suffering and destruction at the hand of the monster is cleverly subverted by switching the bestial nature and violence of the monster onto the military. Not only is this a stark narrative example of the return of the repressed in that the military attempt to annihilate the "Othered" monster through increased bellicosity and firepower, it also addresses the dialectic of Self/Other so that the figure of the monster and the human actions of the military are shown as existing on the same plane. Furthermore, in the case of *Cloverfield*, the justification of the "Hammerdown" response is ambiguous. As there is no concrete or visual evidence that the monster has been destroyed (which is conspicuous given that *Cloverfield's* mantra is that filming an event is to capture its truth) which, when combined with the fact that it would have been impossible to evacuate all civilians out of Manhattan before the strike means that the response by the military would have undoubtedly cost the lives of thousands of people.

This repositioning of the areas of good and evil in the film highlights effectively what Picart and Frank define as the blended frame of the horror narrative that disturbs clean, binary notions of good and evil and sets up the potential of an ethic of response. Such frameworks actively resist definitive and traditional representations by allowing the issues raised by 9/11 to remain open to further interrogation. This resistance would be, according to Picart and Frank, "predicated on a concern for history and for other human beings as they are imagined and then represented on the screen" (Picart and Frank, 2006: 144), enabling viewers to work through the social trauma associated with 9/11. That is, by moving beyond the aesthetic representation of horror and the monstrous, the audience becomes better equipped to understand 9/11 and offer resistance to its thematic and aesthetic strategies.

In not providing a neat resolution to the conflict or concrete evidence of the monster's destruction, *Cloverfield* marks a shift in post-9/11 Hollywood, ambiguously in demarcating good and evil. By suggesting a closer relationship between monster and man, it advances the morally simplified, ethically compromised post-9/11 horror or sci-fi Hollywood films such as *War of the Worlds* and *The Invasion* (2007). It also ruptures the paradox of the monster that Ingebretsen describes as a central tenet of the monster narrative. That is to say, *Cloverfield* radically disturbs the boundaries of good and evil as well as undermining the role of the monster as "Other" against which civil society can be defined. In fact, the equally transgressive actions carried out to vanquish the threat are destabilized by the military's final actions. Here the film refuses to legitimate the military violence, throwing into crisis the safe and straightforward framework of evil traditionally represented in the monster film and in post-9/11 Hollywood cinema.

As the military response to the monster kills the last remaining protagonists of the film as well as countless more Americans, the film prompts the question that if the monster is still alive can the response ever be thought of as justified (a better response alluded to in the film is to have ignored it), and if so, what methods would be deployed next, and would an end point ever be reached? If the monster is killed what does that say about the society remaining, in which a government can sanction the use of extreme military force that indirectly kills thousands of its own people? The film may end on an unsettling moment of doubt, yet the opening title in the film does suggest that the military has been successful (or at least the threat has been temporarily overpowered), as they have recovered the videotape containing the footage the audience has just watched. Although this may change the narrative resolution to a more positive and conventional outcome, the film nonetheless taps into an emerging thematic subtext found in post-9/11 horror and sci-fi movies; namely, the idea of evil within. [8]

Conclusion: *Cloverfield* as an Ethical Response to 9/11

Therefore, unlike Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* and more like George Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005) and *Diary of the Dead* (2007), *Cloverfield* represents the monster as the "perennially useful social tool," but not to cast out the "evil other" from society but to suggest that the monster is in us also. That is, despite the traditional Hollywood coda of the monster as "other" and

the extreme levels of violence and destruction attributable to its actions, it is still both familiar and knowable. Here the monster represents the evil within, or, as Ingebretsen declares, "the monster is us: bone of our bone, wish or our wish, or even ourselves, slightly out of focus – or maybe frighteningly focused" (Ingebretsen 2001: 203). Hence, the monster in *Cloverfield* is not used to reductively reject the "Other," which, as Ingebretsen notes, is a traditional feature of the monster narrative, but to suggest that we may also be guilty of transgressing the boundaries of civil society. It is with this last point that if there is an ethic of response to *Cloverfield* it is with its representation of a blurred boundary between good and evil. This representation challenges Bather's insistence upon the restrictive nature of Hollywood representations of evil and their subsequent commodification. Due to the breakdown of these boundaries that offer restrictive and debilitating understanding toward traumatic events the memory of the event which is sutured prosthetically to a viewer via the experiential nature of cinema can forge what Landsberg (2004: 3) hoped would be "alliances across chasms of difference." Indeed, the spectacle of destruction reframed through *Cloverfield's* use of the character's video camera exacerbates the film's potency as prosthetic memory. The camera mediates and naturalizes the destruction, much as mass-media images of 9/11 did. In *Cloverfield*, the presence of the camera connected to an event, such as the destruction of the World Trade Center, that was saturated through media coverage serves to signify a reality and authenticity that places the viewer more directly in the action. That is, the attaching of the spectacular narrative of *Cloverfield* to an "authentic" reality such as 9/11 engenders more of a direct engagement that can construct new alliances and relationships based on social responsibility gained through experiential sites rather than ones predicated on direct experience, national identity and political affiliations. This in turn strengthens the potential of an ethic of response in that the film also jettisons a more streamlined and simplified response to the traumatic events of 9/11 in favor of a more complicated and ambiguous engagement with the past that can then begin to work through rather than relive the events of that day.

Can a film such as *Cloverfield* change the contours of the Hollywood disaster film or apocalyptic sci-fi so that an ethic of response can be formed via its reception to real-life traumatic events such as 9/11? Although there is the

danger of overdetermining Hollywood in this respect, and simplification is hard to avoid in stressing the links between representation and reception, *Cloverfield* nonetheless attempts to provide what Baudrillard (2002: 13) calls an "understanding of evil" that sees the ebbs and flows of good and evil as existing on the same plane. The blended horror frame of *Cloverfield* begins to approach the idea that the triumph of one does not simply erase the other. If, as Baudrillard contends, "Good does not conquer Evil, nor indeed does the reverse happen: they are at once both irreducible to each other and inextricably interrelated. Ultimately, Good could thwart Evil only by ceasing to be Good" (Ibid.: 13), then *Cloverfield* in its conflicted and ambiguous invocation of 9/11 represents one of Hollywood's first instances of coming to terms with the traumatic events of that day.

Notes

[1] Of particular relevance in this instance is the Japanese monster movie that originated with *Gojira* (1954) and how in symbolically repeating the trauma of Hiroshima the films were able to explicate the present so that a working through of trauma could be facilitated (See Broderick, 1996).

[2] *Cloverfield* continues the trend in disaster movies, especially during the 1990s and 2000s, of using Manhattan as the locus of destruction, as occurs also in *Armageddon*, *Deep Impact* (1998), *Godzilla*, *I Am Legend* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008).

[3] See in particular, *Cloverfield* BlogSpot (<http://1-18-08.blogspot.com/>), the official website (<http://www.1-18-08.com/>) and non-official sites such as, <http://www.filmthreat.com/blog>.

[4] Please note that the authors do not use the term "Holocaust" in some vague reference to mass destruction or death but specifically to the Shoah. Therefore, I have abstracted their points regarding the horror frame and its utility in terms of delineating the monster and its operation in the horror film. Thus, I make no connection between the Holocaust and the events of 9/11 or conflate the representational strategies between Holocaust films and apocalyptic or disaster films.

[5] See Robin Wood (1986: 70-94) for a detailed analysis of repression and its return in the horror film.

[6] Indeed, the impact of modern media and the power of the recorded visual image featured as a central theme in George Romero's *Diary of the Dead*, which also went into general release in 2008.

[7] This particular scene in *Cloverfield* directly references amateur footage captured after the collapse of the South Tower. (Available at: <<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=CV0BVZG1j7E>> [Accessed 21 July 2009].)

[8] The notion of evil within has been a recurrent motif in post-9/11 sci-fi and horror films but also finds thematic representation in other genres post-9/11 such as the Western *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007).

References

Andriano, Joseph D. (1999) *The Immortal Monster: The Mythological Evolution of the Fantastic Beast in Modern Fiction and Film*. Wesport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

Bather, Neil (2004) Big Rocks, Big Bangs, Big Bucks: The Spectacle of Evil in the Popular Cinema of Jerry Bruckheimer, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 2 (1), May 2004, pp. 37-59.

Baudrillard, Jean (2002) *The Spirit of Terrorism*. London: Verso.

Broderick, Mick (ed.) (1996) *Hibakusha Cinema: Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film*. London: Kegan Paul International.

Dargis, Manohla (2008) *Cloverfield* review, *The New York Times*, 18 January. Available at: <<http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/01/18/movies/18clov.html>> [Accessed 21 July 2009].

Ebert, Roger (2008) *Cloverfield* review, rogerebert.com, 17 January. Available at: <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080117/REVIEWS/801170302/1023>> [Accessed 21 July 2009].

Foucault, Michel (1975) Film and Popular Memory: An Interview with Michel Foucault, *Radical Philosophy* 11. pp. 24-29.

Geddes, Jennifer (2001) *Evil After Postmodernism: Histories, Narratives, and Ethics*. London: Routledge.

Ingebretsen, Edward (2001) *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jordanova, Ludmilla (2000) *History in Practice*. London: Arnold.

Lansberg, Alison (2004) *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lee, Nathan (2008) *Cloverfield Is One Giant, Incredibly Entertaining 'Screw You!' to Yuppie New York*, *The Village Voice*, 15 January. Available at <<http://www.villagevoice.com/2008-01-15/film/cloverfield-is-one-giant-incredibly-entertaining-screw-you-to-yuppie-new-york/>> [Accessed 21 July 2009].

Melville, Herman (1993 [1851]) *Moby Dick: Or the Whale*. London: Penguin Books.

Picart, Caroline and David Frank (2006) *Frames of Evil: The Holocaust as Horror in American Film*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Sontag, Susan (1967) *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.

Spiegelman, Art (1986) *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Spiegelman, Art (1991) *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Thompson, Kirsten Moana (2007) *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium*. Ithaca: State University of New York Press.

Wood, Robin (1986) *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Zacharek, Stephanie (2008) *Cloverfield review*, *Salon*, 18 January. Available at:

<<http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2008/01/18/cloverfield/index.htm>
l> [Accessed 21 July 2009].

Zizek, Slavoj (2002) *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London: Routledge.

Websites

Cloverfield BlogSpot. Available at: <http://www.1-18-08.blogspot.com/> [Accessed 21 July 2009].

Official *Cloverfield* site. Available at: <<http://www.1-18-08.com/>> [Accessed 21 July 2009].

Filmthreat. Available at: <<http://www.filmthreat.com/blog>> [Accessed 21 July 2009].

Filmography

Armageddon. 1998. Dir. Michael Bay. Touchstone Pictures.

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford. 2007. Dir. Andrew Dominik. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Children of Men. 2006. Dir. Alfonso Cuarón. Universal Pictures.

Cloverfield. 2008. Dir. Matt Reeves. Paramount Pictures.

The Day After Tomorrow. 2004. Dir. Roland Emmerich. Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation.

The Day the Earth Stood Still. 1951. Dir. Robert Wise. Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation.

The Day The Earth Stood Still. 2008. Dir. Scott Derrickson. Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation.

Deep Impact. 1998. Dir. Mimi Leder. Paramount Pictures.

Diary of the Dead. 2007. Dir. George Romero. Artfire Films.

End of Days. 1999. Dir. Peter Hyams. Universal Pictures.

Godzilla. 1998. Dir. Roland Emmerich. TriStar Pictures.

Gojira. 1954. Dir. Ishirô Honda. Toho Film (Eiga) Co. Ltd.

The Happening. 2008. Dir. M. Night Shyamalan. Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation.

The Host. 2006. Dir. Joon-ho Bong. Chungeorahm Film.

I Am Legend. 2007. Dir. Francis Lawrence. Warner Bros. Pictures.

The Invasion. 2007. Dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers. 1978. Dir. Philip Kaufman. Solofilm.

It Came From Outer Space. 1953. Dir. Jack Arnold. Universal International Pictures.

Jaws. 1975. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Universal Pictures.

King Kong. 1933. Dir. Merian C. Cooper & Ernest B. Schoedsack. RKO Radio Pictures.

Land of the Dead. 2005. Dir. George Romero. Universal Pictures.

Right At Your Door. 2006. Dir. Chris Gorak. Thousand Words.

Schindler's List. 1994. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Universal Pictures.

Sunshine. 2007. Dir. Danny Boyle. Fox Searchlight Pictures.

28 Weeks Later. 2007. Dir. Juan Carlos Fresnadillo. Fox Atomic.

United 93. 2006. Dir. Paul Greengrass. Universal Pictures.

War of the Worlds. 2005. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Paramount Pictures.

World Trade Center. 2006. Dir. Oliver Stone. Paramount Pictures.